

Dreamwalker Rises

VOL 1. CHP 1. (Draft 2)

Verse One: Dreamwalker Rises

"We are that with which stories are made. And our little lives are added to the story when at last we sleep forever. And so we become part of the dreams that others dream when stories are told around a council fire."

The darkness wreathed the council fire as the flames spit sparks and pitch into the night sky. Dreamer stood, looming before the fire to best cast a shadow across the younger members of the tribe as they watched the storyteller in wide eyed wonder. Walker stepped from behind Dreamer and continued speaking where Dreamer had left off.

"These are the stories of the tribe. These are your stories. They belong to you, but more important- you belong to them. You will pass them to the unborn elders of tomorrow. You will keep the Demons and Heroes of the tribe alive by keeping those stories alive, for there is nowhere else where Demons and Gods may live but within the stories that we tell each other."

The children murmured to each other. Virtually every child had heard this before, but every child began to understand the weight of the words in their own time. Some children required many tellings of the story before the lesson took hold. Amidst the sound of murmured voices, Dreamer rose like an ambushing warrior behind the children- now outside the circle- and several of the younger children shrieked.

"And so we will tell you the stories of the First Mother and her companion: First Hero. We will tell you of the Witch Doctor and the Locust King. We will tell of deals First Mother made with the Elder known as Weaver and the pact made between First Hero and the Great Serpent Elder. We will tell you how the Witch Doctor found the ancient laws of the Great Phoenix, that mystery of Void and Fire. And will tell you of the Wendigo and the Hunger that drives them, the fearsome Men of Black and White- that Evil Wyrms known as Falsenight. And we will tell you of what lies behind their hunger and the fear that drives them."

From inside the overlapping Capes that Walker wore, the storyteller produced a grapefruit sized wooden egg carved with designs depicting two figures walking a winding road. The Storyteller grasped the wooden egg at both ends and twisted, and the egg split at the middle with a hollow popping sound. Inside lay another egg, this one carved with depictions of the tribe's history. Dreamer reached in and delicately plucked the smaller egg and then wrenched it open, launching a still smaller egg within high into the air. Walker reach up and snatched the egg on its descent, revealing it in the fire light to be marked with Wendigo faces, and popped it open and tipped the egg within to fall towards the dirt. Dreamer knelt and caught the falling egg with cupped hands and showed the children the vast city walls carved into the egg's surface. Dreamer then gently opened it to reveal an egg again. Dreamer picked the egg from its resting place and handed it to Walker. This egg was smaller than a quail's egg and, as Walker displayed it to the children, the children could see a great tower depicted upon the egg. Walker grasped the egg with both hands, leaving it momentarily invisible. Walker's hands unclasped and in the space where the egg had been lay a black cloth. Dreamer reached up and snatched the black cloth without standing and unfolded it with a flourish and an unexpected flash of light exploded into the air above the storyteller.

Walker stood behind the council fire, cape spread and arms wide.

"And now, the story begins again."

But before either storyteller could speak again, the night was banished by a blast of shimmering snow that roared like a winter lion across the landscape and scoured the darkness away leaving everyone blinking in the sudden washed out light and shivering from the bitter cold. Snarling withered figures with wild hair and hollow eyes appears from out of the whirling clouds of snow. The creatures almost looked like people, and in fact they had been people once. They snapped jaws full of broken bottle teeth and advanced upon the council fire.

"The Wendigo are here." Walker said, flinging the capes aside and drawing his Flanged Mace: Boneshaker.

"Worse will be coming. Children, get behind us." Dreamer added and drew the twin tomahawks: Victor and Edgar.

The corrupted Knights of the Locust King marched out of the freezing mists, the Knights of Unity and the Knights of Purity. Behind them, the monstrous Harvester and the legions of Truthtellers and Confessors stood ready and waiting.

Behind Dreamer and Walker stood the children and the tribe. Between the Locust King's forces and the Tribe stood only these two Storytellers dressed in their crimson armor against a tide of white shrouded soldiers ready to do them harm. Slowly the ranks of Locust King begin marching forward, pikes and Gusarmes out and leveled at the two in blood red raiments. Troops with muskets and flintlocks march besides ones with Kalashnikov variations. The troops washed over and around the two warriors like an avalanche. The Tribe lands disappeared around the two, buried in snow and freezing mists. Tips of corn stalks poked out from the snow as they withered from the cold.

Dreamer and Walker stood back to back in the midst of the enemy, their weapons in constant motion. The army seemed disinterested in them, marching past to devastate the landscape and drown it in winter. Then, as though a signal had been given, the army parted like the red sea and a figure dressed in crimson war robes fringed with gold strode out from the army brandishing an enormous scythe: the Locust King.

Walker stood ready, a bulwark of defense with no gaps through which the enemy could enter. Dreamer shifted constantly, a puzzle no enemy could decipher. Dozens of Knight and Wendigo bodies lay in a gruesome circle around the two. The Locust King strode over the bodies and swung the great scythe one handed in an arc the cut the air in two as it went. The blade bit through Boneshaker without slowing and slit Walker's red armor cleanly, dropping the storyteller to the ground. Dreamer turned to face the Locust King, but the scythe kept swinging, completing a full circle and continuing around, slicing through Dreamer as though the storyteller were maybe of morning fog.

The Locust King stared down at the ruined forms of the storytellers, "What makes you all oppose me? I bring liberation. Through me you all are freed to tell your own stories. Why are you fools willing to die rather than embrace my offer?"

The army in white stormed across the landscape until the land lay like a blank canvas out to the horizon. The Locust King stood, leaning on his scythe, staring down at the bodies of Dreamer and Walker, three figures in red against a background painted white.

The wind whipped the Locust King's gilded robes like a scourge and tossed his twin feathered crests wildly.

"Why do you resist?"

And the wind replied, "A good story is like soil, it must be built up and nurtured. You nurture nothing. You get one harvest, and then the winter rains wash away the top soil and nothing grows for years after."

The Locust King turned, swinging his scythe wildly trying to find the source of the voice, "Where are you?"

"Here. We are of the story." The voice said, echoing as though it were two voices speaking as one.

"Who are you? I have defeated everything and everyone."

"Have you defeated the fear that drives you? What do you fear so much that you felt driven to burn and salt everything you love? What fear could drive you to this destruction?"

"I fear nothing! There is no fear!"

Before him, the broken pieces of the storyteller reassembled themselves into a single form, neither Dreamer nor Walker, but both.

"What are you?" The Locust King hissed.

"We are Dreamwalker. And we will test your claim. We are Dreamwalker and the Shadowlands of your mind and your dreams are open to us. We shall see if there is no fear within your story."

And Dreamwalker stepped forward and passed into the Locust King. And the Locust King shuddered as it happened.

The Shadowlands of the Locust King stretched far away, the horizon pulling up rather than down. Color was missing in these Shadowlands, everything was black or white and the contrast was jagged and painful when viewed too long. Dreamwalker stood in front of a great tower of crystal and steel, a door opened at the base of the tower. And Dreamwalker entered.

Inside the tower the floor was built of black and white squares in a chessboard pattern and a great staircase with no protective railing curled up to the top of the tower. Positioned like chessmen around the room, the Men of Black and White stood frozen in their black suits and black sunglasses, sharp against white shirts and white pocket squares. As one, the Men of Black and White turned to look at Dreamwalker. As one, the Men of Black and White raised their left hands to touch their left ears. As one, the Men of Black and White spoke.

"Target has arrived. Commencing operation. Target will be sanctioned."

Dreamwalker drew twin tomahawks and flanged mace and charged the Men of Black and White. The Men of Black and White moved between the blinking of Dreamwalker's eyes. They did not seem to move, but when Dreamwalker swung a weapon towards one of the men of black and white, that man was simply not in the same spot when the weapon arrived. Dreamwalker could not see them move, but that did not stop the storyteller from feeling the results of their movement. Fists like concrete cinder blocks struck from impossible angles, and gunshots rang out after Dreamwalker felt the exploding pain of bullets striking flesh.

"We can't beat them. They are too many, too fast."

"Target is injured."

"This is the Shadowlands, we live or die as the story demands."

"Target is vulnerable."

"This is not the Shadowlands. This is his Shadowlands. How do you think his stories end?"

"Proceeding with sanctions."

"It ends in the throne room. It has to. We can make it."

Dreamwalker moved, leaping straight up to grasp the spiral staircase. Dreamwalker pulled up onto the stairs and charged up the staircase with the Men of Black and White in hot pursuit. Dreamwalker took the stairs five at a time, almost flying up the stairs. Below on the stairs, the marching cadence of the Men of Black and White echoed like a drumbeat of a military band. Another sound added to the chorus, the rich syrupy sound of something very large sliding across a wet surface, black oily liquid dripped from the edges of the stairs as Dreamwalker ran. Coiling down from above was a great monster serpent with a head like a crocodile and a body wide enough to swallow Volkswagen.

"Hello little morsel." The Serpent said, "I am Falsenight, and it is time for you to learn your place. You are not the hero of this tale."

The Enormous black monster rolled and swirled around the staircase, a liquid cable the width of a sedan, a oily black tsunami in the form of a serpentine leviathan.

"You must remember your role, teller of tales. The chosen one must face our hunger and choose. You may only guide the chosen one, but the choice is not yours to make. The hunger is not yours to face."

"How can we guide the chosen one if we do not know what drives your hunger? How can we teach the chosen one if we do not know the choice that must be made."

Falsenight chuckled, a sound not unlike shaking a bag of razor blades dipped in bear grease.

"That is your challenge. Don't you like a challenge?"

"The Dreamwalker is the storyteller and the mentor. Knowledge is their portfolio." A cold monotone voice whispered, a sound so quiet the breeze tore it apart. "The unknown terrifies them, they cannot quantify it or explain it or weave it into song."

"Who's there?" Dreamwalker called.

Falsenight chuckled, "You have awakened The Grey. He smells your fear. You who sought the fear that drives our little Locust now must face your own."

"Show yourself!"

"If you wish."

Before Dreamwalker a shape gradually faded into view. Human-like, but absurdly thin with long insect-like fingers and a grotesquely large head, smooth like a carapace with mandibles rather than a mouth and compound eyes. The being hung in the air, silent and monochrome, as though superimposed on the the space and not fully occupying it.

"We know your fear. We can take it away: take control, walk our path, and the uncertainty will vanish. We promise certainty, stability, safety. Walk our path. Tell our story."

Dreamwalker took a step back. Falsenight chuckled a third time as the Men of Black and White marched through the serpents great coils and blocked the path down the stairs.

"There is no way out. We offer an answer."

"No, you offer lies." Dreamwalker stepped back again, but this time there was no stairway beneath, and the storyteller tumbled backwards into the unknown.

* * * *

Marion Day awoke gasping for air, and sat upright in bed. He looked around at the disgraceful mess that was the bedroom of his bachelor suite. The bed was a simply mattress laying on plastic on the floor of the room. Movie posters were mounted on the wall with rubber cement, 'The Day the Earth Stood Still', 'The Last Man on Earth', 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', and 'The Day of the Triffids'. Books were left in piles around the room, clothing left piled on books. A laptop lay in the otherwise unused closet. An alarm clock sat on its side next to the bed.

Marion looked around the room again, "It was a dream. Damn. What time is it?"

He looked at the alarm clock, tilting his head.

"Why's it on its side? It's five past five! I start work at six. Did I not wake up when I shut the alarm off? Damn, I'll be late for work!"

Verse Two: Never Lucky

Marion stood and tried to run to the pile of clothing to look for his work clothes. His legs crashed against the inside of the sleeping bag he used for bedding and he landed like a drunk in a three legged race on the floor, aging synthetic carpet scraping open his forearms.

"Late. Late. Late." Marion muttered and he belly crawled out of the sleeping bag towards the pile of clothes. On the top of the pile sat two socks: one red with two black horizontal stripes and one with an argyle design in burgundy and salmon. Marion gave the socks a sniff, shrugged and slipped the socks on.

Sifting through the pile of clothes he found his gym shirt and gym shorts, a Star Wars t-shirt, a Fight Club T-shirt, an Avatar t-shirt, a grey silk neck tie and no collared dress shirt.

"Late. Shirt. Late. Shirt." Marion stood up and opened his closet. He flung the tie over his shoulder and began digging through the bigger pile of t-shirts in the closet. No collared shirt materialized. Marion only had one collared shirt, and it was not on his floor or in his closet.

"Okay, shirt later, eat first. late!"

Marion slid across the linoleum in the kitchen to the fridge and pulled it open. The fridge sat empty save for a tin of cat treats and three MacDonald brand single serving ketchup packets in the door tray. Marion paused and looked at the cat treats and then the ketchup and finally picked up the ketchup packets and squeezed each packet into his open mouth in turn.

"Breakfast of Champions!"

Marion spun, and made his way to the bathroom. He stared at himself in the mirror, and began to wash his face. Something caught his attention. He made a few attempts to comb his unruly hair, but gave up. Marion's hair didn't sit down without a shower and more product than he liked to admit to- and he didn't have time right now. He looked back in the mirror. Something was off. Then Marion saw the problem. He was still wearing his work shirt.

Marion's memory kicked back into gear, admittedly a little late. He had been told last night that he had to do mandatory overtime to get the Mother's Day stock out on display for the morning opening of the store. He'd been up until almost two in the morning sorting Oprah bait. Marion was amazed he'd made it into his bed at all. He tied his tie using the Kent knot, adjusted it a little to get the tie looking symmetrical, and then headed for the door. he grabbed his red converse sneakers and laced them up. Marion noticed, as he laced up his shoes that the scrape on his left shin had scabbed over and seemed to be healing nicely. Mr. Grimly, Marion's landlord, had opened the scrape in Marion's shin when the landlord had tried to push his way into Marion's apartment last Friday to demand overdue rent from Marion. Marion finished lacing his shoes and stood up.

Marion glanced at a retro Spider-man wall clock over his weary looking iMac. He didn't have much hope of making it to work on time, even if he hit every bus transfer perfectly. But he knew he had to try. He quickly stepped out the door and locked it behind him.

He needed to his the Number 8 Main Street Bus first if he stood any chance of making it to work. Then he stopped as a thought caught up with him. He wasn't holding his buss pass. Where was his bus pass? It should have been in his pocket. Where was his pocket? Wait, and why could he see his shin? He wasn't wearing pants. And the door was already locked.

Marion was standing in the hall of his apartment building wearing a white dress shirt a grey silk tie, red converse sneakers and red Astro Boy boxer briefs and nothing else. When he stumbled home last night after his shift he had managed to get his pants off, but not his shirt.

Marion stared at the door as it barred they way between him and his pants. Allons-Y Books drew its employees from a large pool of perpetually unemployed and underemployed arts students and arts grads. Marion knew he was utterly replaceable. Getting to work involved two bus transfers and a three km run and was never convenient. Marion had been late before, particularly when he was required to work late and start early. His manager, Mr. Wheatley didn't care about excuses, especially when the excuse was that his management ability was more in line with the Pharaoh in Exodus than with modern human ethics standards.

Marion had received two previous disciplinary warnings, one about his tardiness and one about his 'lack of company spirit'. Marion sold more books than any three other employees at Allons-Y combined, but he never managed to sell any of the highly promoted odds and ends that the company called 'display pieces' and Marion called 'Oprah Bait'- useless items that looked good placed around Oprah Book club books displayed in a way that told you instantly that their owner would never read the books the pieces were designed to compliment.

Marion debated his options. He could buy pants on the way, but that would take too long. He was particular about his pants, and didn't have money to spend on pants he didn't like. He could simply show up without pants, but then Mr. Wheatley would be able to add Marion's perfectly sculpted quads to his list of reasons to hate Marion. He could simply deny that he had forgotten his pants, but his ability to effect a Jedi mind trick was still in development. He could climb into the clothing donation bin underneath his fire escape and use those pants, but he would almost certainly get stuck and then some homeless guy would steal his astro boy briefs while Marion was trapped.

No, Marion knew that his bus pass, his keys and his pants were all essential to getting to work and keeping his job, and he needed his job to catch up on the rent after he gave Mrs. Trilby next door the \$500 to help with Mercer's colon surgery last month.

Marion needed to get back into his apartment.

Marion realized he had another option: fire escape. Marion had climbed over the fire escape and in through a window into his apartment to avoid Mr. Grimly several times in the past, and had climbed out the same way many times for the same reason. Marion had used the window as an entry point so many times in the past that he had rigged a pulley system with clothesline and several coat hangers so that he could pull open the window and still have it appear locked.

Marion discounted the fire escape as soon as he considered it though. he would have to go outside and climb up, people would see him and he was fairly confident that they would attempt to steal his Astro Boy boxer briefs. He also considered the possibility that he would be arrested for indecent exposure. He also decided that he probably should have included that in his previous calculations.

The only option, that he could see was to ask Mrs. Trilby next door for help. Mrs. Trilby never slept. Their apartments were adjacent, and the fire escapes were attached. If Mrs. Trilby was home, and she was always home, Marion could climb out her window and onto the fire escape and use his pulley system to unlock the window and climb in and get his pants. Marion was fairly confident Mrs. Trilby would let him climb out her window, he looked after her cats when she went on her bus tours and he even sat and let her show him her photos when she got back. Marion had never been on a road trip.

Marion nodded to himself and knocked on Mrs. Trilby's door.

After a brief pause punctuated by the cries of her seven cats, Mrs. Trilby opened the door. She smiled when she saw Marion, then her eyes tracked downward and widened as she noticed his attire and then she shook her head and sighed.

"Hi, Mrs. Trilby, I need to climb out your fire escape."

"Marion. You're just wearing your pants."

"No, that's the problem, I'm not wearing my pants. They're in my apartment along with my key and my bus pass and I'm late for work as of roughly zero minutes. Can I climb out your window onto the fire escape so I can into my apartment and get my pants?"

"Oh dear, Marion how did you forget your trousers? I've worried about you for some time you know boy. You need to see a psychologist or psychiatrist or, you know, some other Brainshrinker specialist, because

you may be clever, but I wonder if everything is wired in correctly some days. Today is definitely one of those days."

"My brain is wired fine Mrs. Trilby, I'm just distracted. But I really think that getting my pants is more important than us discussing the wiring of my brain at this exact moment, don't you?"

"It's never a good time. But you are a dear and I am not going to sit by and not state my worries. The more I think about it now, the more I am sure that his episode is proof of some dangerous malignant brain tumor. And you will not brush this aside, just because you are young and think you are invincible."

"I don't think I'm invincible Mrs. Trilby. I think I'll lose my job if I show up late or without pants or both. Don't you? I can't pay for a brainshrinker if I lose my job now can I?"

Mrs. Trilby considered this, "That does make some sense. But you remember what happened to my Mercer, he almost didn't make it because we ignored his tummy pains. Fine, you can come in, but I expect to see you looking into a good shrinker person as soon as you have cash. Do you hear? You were a dear to help us out, now I insist you help yourself."

"I will Mrs. Trilby. Now, please, the window. Pants."

She let him in and as she closed the door, her cats engulfed him. Seven big aging tabbies each a good fifteen pounds at least, surrounded and nuzzled Marion. The oldest cat, Mercer stepped off the bookshelf right onto Marion's shoulders and snuggled in and began to purr.

"He knows you helped him. I swear." Mrs. Trilby added.

"I think he knows I keep treats for him in my fridge. And I love Mercer, but I have to get moving or I'm going to lose my job and probably this apartment."

"You know, if you had a degree in something you might be able to get a better job."

"I have a Masters Degree in Literature specializing in Post-Colonial Literature. I am an honest to Vishnu scholar."

"I meant becoming a Doctor or a lawyer or something 'real', like Sammy across the hall, she's a hospice nurse- she gets paid to wipe the behinds of people like me when we start thinking that we're seeing our parents for the second time. It's good money, you could some of that action if you got a useful degree."

Marion waded his way through Mrs. Trilby's seven cats. Cobra had latched claws onto Marion's argyle sock and Marion was forced to drag the black cat along, a game that Cobra never tired of. Fluffy leaned in to every step that Marion made and even though Marion knew to lift his legs up and over the white Persian, the effort made walking a challenge. Fone, Phoney and Smiley meowed in stereo or whatever the triple version of stereo was and tried to block Marion's way. Robin Hood lay several steps in front, creamy belly turned skyward and already purring expectantly. Marion held his left hand away from his body and snapped his fingers. The heads of seven cats turned in unison and moved under the the outstretched hand allowing Marion a chance to move past them.

"They listen to you better than me some days."

"Being their uncle and not their mamma makes it easier. I get to bring the treats and not the spray bottle."

"That's true I suppose."

"I'm getting distracted again. I need to move."

"You see. Forgetting again. I think you've got a brain tumor like that John Travolta character in that movie where he's telegraphic and buys all those ugly chairs from that nice lady and Forrest Whittaker plays that nice Radio guy, or was that Cuba Gooding Jr? I hope it was Whittaker, I like his acting better, he seems nice even when he's playing a bad guy."

"I'm not sure that there are a lot actual bad guys in the world, just people trying to be good in the wrong ways."

As he spoke, Marion opened the window and climbed onto the fire escape. He looked to his left at his own window and stopped. Mrs. Trilby saw him pause and asked, "What's the matter dear?"

"They don't connect." Marion said, staring in dismay, "There's a three foot gap or so between the fire escapes. I'd never noticed before."

"Before?"

"I've used the fire escape a bunch, but always up and down. Never across."

"That's not very far. You're young."

"We're five storys up."

"Well that is a fact."

"I don't know that I have a choice though," Marion said.

Verse Three: The Firebird, and Pants

Marion peered through the metal metal grill work down five floors to the cracked and settled asphalt below. Water had filled in old pot holes. The alley was littered with garbage that consisted of a few more broken bottles than Marion had hoped to see.

"I don't know that I have a choice at all," Marion said and swung a naked leg over the railing of the fire escape.

He swung his other leg over and then stretched a leg out to reach the other fire escape. His foot touched down and, as he attempted to shift his weight, Marion lost his balance and his feet slid further apart. His left leg snagged on the railing on his fire escape and left him stuck awkwardly balancing between the two fire escapes. Marion shifted his weight and tried to find a balance point where he could safely move his right foot over to his fire escape, while at the same time trying to not look down. Marion did not consider himself particularly afraid of heights, but balancing over a five story void had a way of introducing the concept that was new and surprisingly effective. As he struggled to free his left leg and also regain enough balance to move his right leg, Marion noticed movement from the alleyway below. Taking a moment to look, he saw a man in a dark suit and sunglasses watching him for the alley below. Marion tried to get a good look, but the fire escape creaked and Marion was forced to heave his right leg to his side to prevent himself from slipping further. He quickly swung one leg and then the other over the railing to safety before looking back. But when he looked again, he saw nothing but a poster for "Men in Black 5: K's Still Alive!"

Shaking his head in the hopes of clearing his mind, Marion reached through the small opening left in his window and grasped the slim line of rope that would open the lock on his window. He pulled, and nothing happened. He pulled again, a little harder, and felt a strange resistance in the line. He gave the line a solid yank, hoping to pull loose whatever was snagging in his system, and hear a melodic jangle that Marion knew was the sound of three coat hangers falling to the floor and his system failing entirely.

Marion looked back the Men in Black poster and bared his teeth in a growl as though the poster and ghost CIA agent look alike were somehow to blame. He looked through the window and saw his pants laying in a crumpled pile in the hallway. Marion knew that he would now have to break the window if he wanted to get in.

Worries began to have a town council meeting in Marion's head. He worried that Mr. Grimly would hear the sound of breaking glass. He worried that Mr. Grimly might use the sound of breaking glass as an excuse to barge into his apartment. He worried that Mr. Grimly would use the whole event as an excuse to evict him and possibly even call the police. Mr. Grimly had never liked Marion as far as he could tell. They had never been friends. Marion didn't think Mr. Grimly liked friends. You couldn't charge friends rent.

"I don't think Mr. Grimly will ever forgive me for that inflatable Moose Incident," Marion said quietly to himself, "He won't forgive me for this either, but at least this one would be my fault. But, If I'm very lucky, Mr. Grimly will never know about this one."

Marion knew Mr. Grimly was a stranger to compassion, and that he would evict if no rent was forthcoming. And since Marion couldn't pay his rent if he got fired, options seemed to be a choice between bad option number one and bad option number two. So no point in hesitating now.

He looked around, but saw no tool that he could use to break the window. Marion examined the window. It was very old and consisted only of a single pane of glass. From experience, Marion knew that the window let in the cold without mercy. It couldn't be that strong. Marion looked at his hands and experimentally balled both hands into fists. Marion shook his head, unconvinced at this own display. He closed his eyes, and swung a clenched fist at the window.

The sound of breaking glass erupted in Marion's ears and he was surprised that blow hadn't hurt. He opened his eyes to find his right hand red with blood and slowly became aware of a sharp sting in his knuckles.

"I'm never lucky." Marion said quietly as he pulled the last big glass shards of the window and began squeezing through the window. Half way through, Marion realized he could have opened the window now that it was broken and not risked cutting himself on the shatter glass still in the frame. He realized this as the glass cut his thighs in neat angular little grooves. The pain in his thighs was excruciating as he pulled himself through. When he finally stood inside his apartment again, he found himself wondering if Mrs. Trilby was right about that tumor and his attention to detail.

He walked to the sink and washed his knuckles and his thighs, delicately putting X-Men band-aids over the cuts, using a whole box of band-aids in the process, since he didn't have any larger bandages, his last box of band-aids in fact. He felt a bit woozy and wasn't too pleased with the day's current performance. Marion splashed water on his face to hopefully clear his head. But when he removed his hands and looked at the mirror, his reflection was gone.

In place of the mirror and the expected reflection, Marion was staring at a bird, much like a pheasant or a peacock with a long sweeping tail, but also impressively expansive wings. The bird was an iridescence of reds and golds that moved in waves over a black backing like fire over hot coals. Actual flames licked the air around the bird and it looked at Marion intently. Then it cocked its head away into the distance and took flight, a nimbus of flame surrounding it. Marion debated following it, but found that it didn't matter. He was flying behind the firebird- coasting on its wake.

They flew out over a lonely highway, passing a worn down old diner out past the end of the highway into a vast wilderness and then on. They flew over a small village built of mud or clay with grass on the roofs and further on into a blasted landscape of burned fields and shattered homes. The land below took on the appearance of a war zone or the aftermath of a zombie outbreak, slowly becoming increasingly urban until the firebird's flight took them straight into the heart of a city under siege by its own people, with fires in the streets and upturned cars. The firebird aimed its path for a huge skyscraper in the center of the city and Marion held his breath as they aimed straight at the shimmering glass facade.

The scene shattered to sound of exploding glass and Marion found himself floating in darkness.

The firebird circled and then landed in the void and sat, quietly nesting in the darkness. Marion looked around and saw a vast spiderweb stretching across the darkness and a small girl with hair in dark braids stuck fast in the center of the web. To Marion's horror the web began to dance as something large and heavy began to move along the web, deep in the darkness. As Marion stared in horror a pounding drumbeat began in the distance. The Girl began to struggle and then seemed to notice Marion. She

looked at him, and then seemed to look past him. Marion turned around to follow her gaze and found himself staring at his reflection in the mirror of his bathroom.

Marion stared at his reflection a moment, and then shook his head.

"Maybe Mrs. Trilby is on to something," He said quietly.

Then Marion noticed that the drumbeat was still pounding in the background. And then Marion realized it was the sound of a meaty fist pounding on his apartment door.

"I know you're in there you little newt. I heard you banging around. If that glass was anything important its coming out of your damage deposit. Hell, I'll skin you and sell your skinny hide to make up my missing rent! Open this door before I break it in! Doors are expensive!"

"I'm not that far behind on my rent." Marion muttered to himself, "Maybe torture and then allow to live level of late. But no, Grimly goes straight to skinning and selling my hide."

Mr. Grimly kept banging on the door, demanding to be let in.

"Let me in! I'm your landlord! You've got no secrets from me you filthy little salamander!"

Marion realized that Mr. Grimly was counting on Marion opening the door so the landlord could pretend he had been invited in. But Grimly sounded really angry and might graduate from yelling to actually entering the apartment without permission, Tenancies Act be damned.

Marion ran out into his front hall and grabbed his pants.

Marion heard the sound of jangling metal from the hall, a key chain. Panicking, Marion jammed a chair under the door and flipped the three door-bolts into place. Marion had added the door-bolt two months ago after Mr. Grimly snuck into Marion's apartment to wait for Marion to return home. Mr. Grimly had tried to insinuate that he could have Marion killed and the body disposed of quite easily. The landlord had made references to alleged criminal friends and a dog breeder who wasn't picky on what she used to make her kibble. Marion hadn't really believed the landlord, but had no intention of testing his claims and had installed the door-bolts the next day, one at the top of the door about forehead level, one about chest level and one near the ankles. Marion didn't bother to put on his grey work pants. Instead, he went back

to the broken window and, opening it this time, he slipped out and began climbing down the fire escape, pants in hand.

Marion heard the door open and then a metal thud as the door reached the limit allowed by the door-bolts

"How dare you install a door-bolt you little worm! I'm going to nail your skinny ass to the wall you little skink!"

Marion tried to pull on his pants as he ran, but the converse made that impossible. He paused and untied his laces, ignoring the passersby who were no doubt eyeing up his Astro Boy boxer briefs. As he pulled his pants on, Marion looked up to see the number eight Main street bus pulling into the stop. He grabbed his converse and ran in mismatched stocking feet towards the bus stop, but was still a block away when the bus pulled out from the curb and rounded the corner onto main street.

Marion staggered to a cursing and wheezing halt, watching his only hope coil out of sight round the corner. He sighed.

"I'm never lucky."

Verse Four: Allons-Y and High Achievers

Marion arrived at Allons-Y Books on foot, having missed every bus between his apartment and work. He was sweating a line of moisture down his spine and breathing through an open mouth. The sweat of the run had finally defeated his unruly hair, which now sat limp and wet against his skull. A mist of steam rose from his shoulders. Marion would have stopped and quietly died in an alleyway if he was not terrified that he might lose his job for this infraction. And he was definitely infracting at the moment, it was already well past six, closing on half past.

He was Late for work. But he know he still has a chance. The managers may not have seen him, but they didn't know that Marion wasn't there. People started and stopped their shifts at staggered irregular times, Mr. Wheately might only see Marion once or twice in a day- if it was a good day. So, Mr. Wheately might have already confirmed that Marion was late; but far more likely, Mr. Wheately didn't even realize Marion was late. Marion just had to look normal. At a quarter to eight the staff would convene for the Team

Huddle where Mr. Wheately would make a vague buzzword laden speech that was apparently intended to inspire the employees to work hard for no extra reward to improve profits for the shareholders. He just has to be visible in the Team huddle, and avoid being seen arriving, and he might have a chance.

Marion knew he couldn't walk in through the front door. He would need to slip in through the loading doors and appear to have been busy in the warehouse, sorting books and Oprah bait. The problem of course was that Mr. Wheately was not the only person at Allons-Y Books who didn't like Marion. Leo Hopper, the Warehouse Manager didn't like Marion either. Marion blamed the inflatable Moose, but that didn't help the fact that Leo would not let Marion get away with sneaking in tardy if the stock manager could prove that Marion had just that. So stealth was the name of the game.

The back door was locked and normally a person would need to press the buzzer to be let in. Marion had no intention of pressing the buzzer. Instead Marion slipped in the back, squeezing in through the opening left between the truck currently in the loading dock and the edge of the loading gate. There was just enough space to get in; and once inside, Marion immediately picked up a box from the loading bay and carried it further in, setting it down as though he had been there all along. Marion cautiously glanced around to see if he had been spotted and saw the heavy bulldog face of Leo Hopper staring at him.

Leo definitely saw Marion, but the question was when Leo had spotted him. If Leo had seen Marion enter through the loading door, Marion was doomed. Marion was confident that Leo could put two and two together and realize why Marion had been sneaking in through the shipping entrance.

Marion's plan had been to shuffle around the back, trying to clear space for the next shipment, and act like he had been in the back the whole time. But Leo had seen him and now that was at risk. If he had slipped in cleanly, the worst he would have been in trouble for was not helping set up the Mother's Day displays, but that would just be a lecture on prioritizing, not disciplinary action for being late. Now, he risked getting fired for being both late and trying to avoid getting caught. So the stakes were much higher now that Leo had seen him. But maybe Marion was lucky, and Leo hadn't realized that he had seen Marion attempting to avoid being caught arriving late.

"Please let me be lucky," Marion breathed his breath.

Leo was talking the the driver of the currently docked delivery truck, and Marion felt he had little choice but to continue with his plan. He began looking through the boxes, and sorting the good publishers into a pile where he could easily stock it to the shelves later. Marion knew from experience that if the book

wasn't on a certain celebrity reading list or from the latest teen best selling series then it stood little chance of being shelves with any care or attention.

Marion took periodic looks at Leo while he worked, Leo remained busy with the driver- doing what Marion couldn't fathom. They seemed to be talking an awful lot for a simple pick up, but Leo never did seem to value the company beyond what it could give him. Marion understood that, he didn't value the company much either, but he did value the people who came to him looking for good books. Leo remained in conversation with the driver while Marion sequestered the boxes that had arrived from good publishers. But although Leo never approached Marion, the warehouse manager through several more unpleasant glares at Marion.

Finally there was a buzz on the intercom and a tin metallic voice said, "Alright high achievers, let's meet by the front displays for a team huddle." Marion recognized Mr. Wheately's voice and knew this was the moment of truth.

He turned to go, but as he moved to head down stairs he heard Leo say, "Oh I can't answer that, ask Marion he's the only guy who knows the Literature section well enough to give you an answer to that."

Marion turned back around to see the driver walking over. He was an older man dressed better than Marion would have expected a deliver driver to be dressed, in brown corduroy pants with a red shirt and a brown tweed jacket. The man's hair was an aged pale blond and hung long tied back into a ponytail. He offered a hand to Marion which Marion shook.

"Hi, Leo told me that you could help me tell where something belongs."

Marion nodded and then quickly shook his head, "Yes, I mean no. I don't mean to be rude, but that intercom announcement was for us. I need to swing down and get to that meeting."

The man kept smiling, "This will just take a moment."

"I'm sorry," Marion said, "Who are you?"

"I'm just somebody interesting in storytelling, like you." The man kept shaking Marion's hand, who suddenly had the feeling that the man wouldn't give Marion back his hand until Marion had agreed to help.

"What can I do for you?"

"I have this book that's not really a kids book, but reads like a fable or a fairy tale. It's big in scope, but keeps things simple. Think Jonathon Livingstone Seagull. The copy on the covers calls it a children's book, but if we put it in the children's section no adults are going to read it, and it's often scarier than little kids might be ready to handle."

"Kids can handle more than you think. And adults will totally read stuff in the kids section. Harry Potter is in both sections now, but the books didn't start there. The publisher went back and put out adult additions when they realized the market existed. But if you want a easy place to stuff the books so that both groups feel like they are allowed to read them and also will let parents feel like you didn't trick them into reading nightmare fuel to their precious little kids, then probably the Teen section. What is this book, you haven't even told me the title."

"The last princess. Have you read this story? It isn't new. It's about a princess who realizes that the presence of her kingdom live a much worse life than she does. You know, kind of like Buddha. But instead of just meditating or leaving like Buddha, she decides she has to fix things. The problem is at the abilities wealth comes from the workers working harder and harder every year. And if they stop the whole kingdom will fall apart. She looks and looks for a solution, and she can't find one. Just one that looks like everything is lost a pair of storytellers bring her a story of a new way to live. two story tellers, one cold like the void, one bright like fire. And they show her the way through the darkness. What do you think?"

Marion shook his head, "Maybe I just read too much, but I'm sorry. It sounds like I've heard the story a thousand times before. Kind of lame."

"It's not lame, it's an archetype. Timeless."

"Okay, archetype. But that still doesn't mean the story is that well constructed. Where do the storytellers come from? And what are: they? Stephen King teaming up with Obi-Won Kenobi to teach her how to be a Jedi? Why are they in the story? It sounds like bad writing if somebody has to sweep in at the last moment to save her?"

"They're there from the beginning. But I guess it depends on whose story it is. And as for why; everyone has to choose what kind of story they want to join."

"Okay, I have no idea what you're talking about now."

"Marion. Everyone is living out a story. Everyone is writing their own story and participating in other people's stories. Years from now, some of those stories will be remembered and some will be forgotten. Who decides which ones? Centuries from now, some stories will still be around from this era. They will be myths and legends. People may be worshiping the great provider god who brings the harvest and appears as a clown under a sacred archway made of gold. How do you know what makes a story survive? Merlin as a character is older than the King Arthur story and grafted on to that mythology. Maid Marion was not part of the original Robin Hood legend. We tell stories about Gilgamesh and Noah, but if they were ever real people were they individuals or did the stories of a dozen different kings merge in the telling of the story through the centuries to give us the character of Gilgamesh?"

Marion widened his eyes, "Now see that is really interesting. Is that part of the book?"

"It's part of your book. Are you familiar with the Hero's Journey, the Joseph Campbell theory?"

"Yeah, it's the monomyth. The idea that most or all stories, at least a good number of the stories, I don't know how many, but a bunch of the old stories- plus everything that George Lucas seems to write- all follow the same structure."

"And it starts with the hero receiving a call. And sometimes the hero tries to refuse the call, and when that happens there are consequences. The hero suffers until they answer the call to adventure. This happens again and again. Do you know why? Because stories are circular. The hero goes out into the world but always returns home to share his story. When he does this he inspires a new generation of heroes. Your stories don't die permanently. They are resurrected with each retelling. Stories are like the phoenix."

"Wait. What?"

"Stories are a firebird lighting the darkness for people without light. They are meaning in the void."

"Okay, back up. Back up. Who are you and what are you talking about?"

"Day! I should have known I'd find you back here!" Marion turned to see the obscenely tall and thin form of Percy Wheately walking like a determined paper cut towards them, "You missed the morning huddle. All of my true high achievers were out there. Where were you? You were hiding in the warehouse. It's almost seven, you know we open early on Mother's Day."

"Sorry Mr. Wheately. This rep, I'm sorry I didn't get your name, wanted help determining where to file their new book."

Mr. Wheately Shook his head, "Not only can't you prioritize, you can't do what you spend your time actually doing. You should have been out front facing and building the displays, instead you hid back here with your little hipster niche market books and your specialty publishers who don't bring in the revenue, and then you can't even stock the back room correctly."

"I haven't been stocking the back room, Mr. Wheately. I've been assisting a publisher's representative."

"I am getting tired of your antics Day. Get out on the floor. Don't you dare neglect your section. You may sell books, but that won't protect the rest of your shortcomings. I am out of patience and that means you have run out of second chances."

Verse Five: Linking Rings

Marion trudged out the side entrance to Allons-Y Books, passing through the Comet Coffee Shop that was attached to each Allons-Y Bookstore. He would normally have grabbed a Green Tea Latte, but didn't feel comfortable spending money this time. Today could not have gone worse as far as Marion could tell. He ran back over his situation in his head, trying to get a handle on the scope to which his life had fallen apart and begun to split at the seams. Marion knew that he was not the most put together of people, his mind wandered and although he felt that he was smarter than most people he met, he was acutely aware that his thinking did not proceed in a manner that most people knew how to interact with easily. Marion had felt adrift in his life, isolated from social interaction by what seemed to be a translation barrier. People did not think his mental language and he did not think theirs. They shared a spoken language but somehow this did not translate into a common language of thought.

Even his best friend, Harley Night, did not think as Marion did. That was probably for the best, the two men were each others crutches. Harley was utterly predictable and loved rules and systems. He loved back up plans and redundancies. The fact that they got along would have been considered a miracle if there were not a much simpler answer available. The two had been friends since the first grade. They had known immediately that they needed to be friends. Their names being day and night, when the two boys met they had realized that they either needed to become best friends or arch-enemies, possibly both

eventually. Family had argued that the two had become so different precisely because they were friends; offloading tasks to the other until the two friends were so specialized that they almost didn't count as two people anymore. Marion knew that if anyone could help him get through this rough patch, it was his best friend since the first grade: Harley Night.

Marion reached into his pocket and brought out his Samsung Ace to call Harley for advise.

Harley didn't answer on the first ring, which he normally did. Marion wondered if Harley was in a meeting. Harley worked for Pandora Data Storage Systems, a company that stored huge amounts of electronic data for companies that couldn't afford to maintain their own data. Harley was in the Data Coordination Department, although what that mean was beyond Marion's continued attempts at understanding. Harley's job seemed to Marion to be a cross between constantly cleaning one's room and doing far more math than any human should ever do when not involved in sending humans to Jupiter. On the third ring Harley answered.

"Harley Night speaking, I can hear you."

"Hi Harley, its Marion. How are feeling?"

"I'm fine Marion. What's up? I'm at work."

"I think I'm in trouble. They had me work really late last night and wanted me to come in early on top of that. And I was so tired I didn't wake up from my alarm, because I was having a really creepy dream that still won't go away. I mean, I'm had several flashes of the dream while I've been awake- and it's like prophetic future telling dream, so that's creepy. And Mrs. Trilby thinks I have a tumor like John Travolta in Phenomenon. And I forgot to put on my pants so I had to break into my place through the back window, and I broke it- the window not my place. And Mr. Grimly is yelling threats at me and I was late for work. But I didn't get caught, not for being late anyway I don't think. But I got in trouble for helping a delivery guy, which is a really dumb reason to yell at an employee, so I think he was just looking for an excuse. Which means I think Mr. Wheately wants to fire me and he's just looking for a reason. And the delivery guy was really spooky too, like he knew about my hallucinations. And then I won't be able to pay my rent and Mr. Grimly will evict me and I won't have a job or a place, and I'm really kind of freaking out. So, you know, I could really use some good rock solid Harley advice."

The silence on the line was not encouraging. Marion could hear Harley breathing through the phone line.

"Harley, man? I'm freaking out, I need to know what to do. You know you're all I got. Don't leave me hanging."

"Marion, you need to lie low, stay away from places where you can rock the boat. How's your finances?"

"I gave Mrs. Trilby that money to help her when she was short that money to pay for her cat's surgery. I haven't got a paycheque since then. I'm overdrawn on my bank account and I need the paycheck to pay my rent and make a payment on my VISA so that don't cancel my card."

"So, you're not just tight, you're over the limit. That doesn't give us any wiggle room to work with. My company isn't showing the positive growth numbers this quarter that people were predicting, and so nobody is likely to be getting any bonuses. I've heard rumors of people being offered early retirement packages, which never bodes well. The whispers have me a little nervous, they don't add up to anything good. So I don't know that I have room in the budget to help you much. You've got whatever I can offer, but it may not be much. So lay low, tone down the Marion meter from Marion to corporate drone and don't give anyone any reason to fire you. You're a customer service clerk in a book store, and you sell a lot of books. Just stop pissing people off and they'll ignore you for bigger problems. Do you hear what I'm saying Marion?"

"I'm trying to do that. But I'm not doing so great. I'm seeing stuff. I told you. I saw Men in Black guys watching me from the alley when I broke back into my apartment. And while I was in my apartment I had this hallucination of a phoenix like out of Harry Potter flying through all sorts of weird places and then landing in deep space and watching a little girl trapped in some kind of giant space spider's web. The whole thing creeped me out and Mrs. Trilby thinks it means that I have a brain tumor. I mean, I didn't tell her about the phoenix vision."

"You don't have a tumor Marion."

"I don't think so either, but what I'm trying to say, is that it feels like I can't keep things under control, even as well as normal. I'm seeing things, and it's not like I'm very good at acting normal most times. How do I act normal when I'm going all possessed prophet on everyone? I walked out of the house without pants today Harley. That's weird even for me."

Harley was silent. Marion wanted to keep rambling, but restrained himself and waited.

"Have you seen anything weird since getting to work?" Harley asked at last.

"Not so far. Just a creepy dream. Forgetting my pants. Seeing an agent like in the Matrix. And a full blown hallucination of a Phoenix in deep space. But no, nothing since I got to work. But if it happens when I'm on the floor talking to a customer then I'm doomed."

"You could call in sick, explain that you're seeing things and think you might have a concussion."

"Wheately would find a way to fire me. He would say that I was lying."

"You could apologize and say you feel light headed as soon as a hallucination hits, then the customer would probably be sympathetic rather than angry."

"If I remember to say it. I sat like a moron for the Phoenix hallucination."

"Stop looking for reasons to fail Marion."

"I'm not looking for reasons to fail. I am afraid of what will happen in anything goes wrong. It feels like I could get fired at any moment. It feels like everything is hanging by a thread about to snap."

"You could always go back to school. Get a teaching degree."

"That's a long term plan. I don't have money to feed myself or put a roof over my head if I lose this job."

"I'm not letting you starve, you're my best friend."

"You just said you didn't have any wiggle room."

"I don't care. I won't let you starve unless we starve together."

"Amy would love to hear that."

"Amy would understand."

"No, she wouldn't. Amy has hated me since we met. She doesn't like the fact that you've known me longer than you will ever had known her. She thinks she needs to one up me or something. She doesn't like me at all."

"You're a good person and she's a good person, we can work things out if, and only if, it comes to that, but keep your head down and do your job in the most mediocre and boring way possible and it won't come to that. Can you do that for me.?"

"I can do that as long as I'm lucky and don't start going all Oracle of Delphi again."

Harley didn't answer. Initially Marion thought that this must be due to his friend trying to think of more strategies to manage the hallucinations, and then Marion became aware of his surroundings and realized that he wasn't in the Park courtyard beside Allons-Y Books anymore, but standing in a large vaguely Dark Ages looking village beside a Motte and Bailey Castle.

People wandered the streets of the village. Soldiers stood on wooden watchtowers that sat interspersed on the out wall of the village and a few walked with large spears through the village. The ground was a grey clay mud and the logs used everywhere in construction were painted with some kind of white paint. Pale straw thatch was the only real color visible. The soldiers dressed in black and white cloaks and surcoats.

As Marion was taking all of this, a human like figure in tattered grey rags with wide eyes and sharp teeth peered out from behind a building. Marion saw it and recognized it from his earlier dream as a Wendigo. Other people had seen the Wendigo as well and people began screaming.

Marion shook his head in frustration.

"Why can't I be lucky? Am I wearing the wrong underwear? Does the universe have something against Astro Boy?"

The Wendigo stared at Marion, and then charged.

Verse Six: An Ass Transformed

The wendigo didn't so much run as it scrambled across the ground- Marion thought that thing was trying to run on all fours, but was being hampered by the proportions of its body which were still nominally

human. The creature seemed bled dry, both of colour and of body fat. The Wendigo was so thin it might have passed for an Egyptian Mummy, save that it was very rapidly closing on Marion.

Marion took a moment before a thought occurred to him. Vision or not, tumour or not, he should probably be running right now. The wendigo was now close enough that Marion could count its teeth and smell its acid breath. That was enough of a preview for Marion.

Marion fled from the Wendigo.

The grey clay mud underneath Marion's feet didn't make flight easy and he scrambled along, not to unlike the Wendigo getting covered in grey as the paint like liquid clay sprayed up from his thrashing attempts to flee.

As he ran he heard bits and pieces of conversation.

"Is that a Wendigo?"

"The Knights of Purity will kill it."

"Who is that it's chasing?"

"Must be a savage, might turn into a Wendigo at any time."

"Maybe a spy for Blackhart?"

"Doesn't look like part of Blackhart's tribe."

"We should kill it just to be safe. Blackhart's raiding parties will starve us all."

"Maybe we should try to make peace?"

"Don't say such things, the King will send the Hound for you."

"He should send the Hound for Blackhart."

"The Hound can smell fear. It will cleanse the heathen and the infidel."

"I don't think Blackhart feels fear."

Most of the people's faces remained a blur as Marion ran through the muddy streets. Nobody got in Marion's way. But he did notice a woman dressed in considerably better than the undyed grey wool clothing of the other villagers. She was dressed in black with red bird-like patterns lining the sleeves and hemlines. Her appearance seemed ageless, she might have been thirty years old and might have been eighty. Her hair was raven black with a streak of grey running through it. Her eyes bore the hard expression of somebody who was used to being under attack and she used those eyes to stare Marion almost to a stop. She looked at Marion, and nodded with an expression that one might use for a business acquaintance or a distant relative.

The snarls of the Wendigo reminded Marion that he should be running. Beside the woman, three Soldiers turned and noticed the wendigo and the fleeing stranger. They were dressed in white tabbards with white leather plates visible underneath. On the tabbard in black was a sword engulfed in flame. One of the soldiers looked distinctly older, one was built like a large fat toad and looked unsettlingly familiar and the third was tall and thin as a paper cut and looked just like Percy Wheately.

"Lady Morrigan, we must destroy the monster." The eldest of the three soldiers said.

The woman nodded and the soldiers joined the pursuit without another word. Marion didn't look back to see how far behind the wendigo the soldiers were and simply ran on.

"Rule number one about horror movies: When running from the monster, don't look back and trip." Marion gasped to himself as he ran. But the grey mud under his feet was hard to get any traction on, and Marion found himself sliding and stumbling for more than he would like to be given the circumstances. He rounded a corner and found himself staring a stone well directly in his path. He tried to swerve and found his feet slipping free from the sloppy surface beneath him. His legs kicked skyward and he swung his arms wildly in a desperate attempt to first regain his balance and then, belatedly, to break his fall. His chin hit the ground first and he bit his tongue. His vision and his hearing faltered, and Marion found himself in a brief sea of white light and distant ringing bells, and then he was aware that he was lying in the liquid grey clay. As his hearing returned, Marion noticed the sounds of battle: the metal clang of swords, the yells and grunts of physical exertion, the snarl of a cornered beast.

Marion pulled himself to his hands and knees, aware of the taste of blood in his mouth and feeling that blood trickling down his chin. Marion looked behind him to see the soldiers locked in combat with the

wendigo, which they had back against the earthen wall of a nearby hut. The wendigo was unarmed, but even with just claws and fangs the monster was keeping both soldiers firmly on the defensive.

Marion tried to gather himself, and as he wobbled to his feet he noticed that a crowd had gathered. And again Marion became aware of bits of conversation from the crowd.

"Look at the savage. Look at the blood on his mouth. Who did he bite? He'll turn for sure."

"No, he has to actually eat them, otherwise every overactive lover would turn."

"It's not about eating, it's about the symbolic act of cannibalism. A person has to devour something of value, a betrayal of their people."

"That's rubbish, you watch. he'll turn any minute now."

A man screamed in pain, and Marion turn his attention back to the fight. The Wendigo had ripped out the throat of the fat soldier and taken his sword. The wendigo was not a skilled swordsman, but the extra ferocity of his attacks drove to two remaining soldiers back. The tide of the battled had clearly turned against the remaining two soldiers.

Marion shook his head. The soldier weren't winning. Marion wasn't sure they that they were going to survive. Marion glanced around and saw the crowd had dispersed. Now the villages cowered behind doors and peered over window frames. They weren't going to be helping any time soon, and Marion didn't see other soldiers nearby.

"At least in the first dream like this one I had my Tomahawks. What were they called: Victor and Edgar? Weird names, okay- but that fits my brain. Either way it would be nice have them so I could help."

As he was speaking, Marion noticed that his hands had closed around two cylindrical objects. He looked down and discovered that he did in fact have the tomahawks in his hands.

"More proof that this is a hallucination. But maybe I can win the hallucination." Marion said to him.

He sized up the Wendigo, now splattered with the soldiers' blood. It didn't look friendly. But at least compared to his last hallucinated battle, the odds were good here. Marion clenched his teeth and joined the fight. He didn't know how to fight, but he made the most of his position. The wendigo had pushed the

soldiers back and Marion was now behind the creature. He charged silently and swung both tomahawks down onto the Wendigo's shoulders, cleaving into the creature and causing both its arms to fall limply to its sides. The Wendigo spun around to face Marion, arms pinwheeling like sock puppets, and the Wendigo lunged teeth first and Marion, causing him to stumble back and fall hard to the ground. The impact of the fall drove the air from his lungs, and Marion looked up in terror at the advancing Wendigo as Marion struggled to force air back into his lungs.

The Wendigo now had its back to the soldiers and they took advantage by thrusting swords through the back of the wendigo, metal triangles protruding from the creatures chest pinning it to the sky above Marion as it thrashed and frothed and slowly died.

Marion scrambled out from under the quivering wendigo, and the eldest soldier placed a booted foot on the creature's back and pushed it loose from the two swords to land in the liquid clay.

Marion started to thank the soldiers, but stopped short noting that they were staring at him with expressions that didn't scream gratitude. Marion suddenly noticed people whispering about his tomahawks.

"I saw him summon those weapons."

"A wizard."

"Those are the weapons of the savage."

"A witch."

"A wizard."

"He'd have slit our throat while we slept."

"Worse than a Wendigo. We're probably lucky the Wendigo flushed him out." The Mr. Wheately Guard muttered

Marion shook his head as the soldiers began to advance upon him with their swords pointed forward.

"I've got to get a rabbit's foot or something. This luck is going to kill me."

Marion spun his heel in the mud and grabbed the well for support and then bolted. Soldiers gave chase. Marion could hear them behind him. They were armoured, and Marion noticed that they hadn't caught him and the Wendigo until he had fallen. Maybe he could outrun them. Although where he would run, Marion was entirely unsure. He didn't know the layout of the town, and he expected that the soldiers did.

Marion couldn't see any street signs and the repeating collection of mud house, log house, sod house quickly blurred in Marion's mind and he found himself running wildly down slippery mud streaked gaps between buildings that all looked alike.

"I'm lost in a hostile dream town in the middle a hallucination, any minute now I'm going to find myself in my underwear." Marion gasped between ragged breaths.

Marion had been right about being faster than the soldiers, but he was starting to wear out. And to make matters worse, the Soldiers clearly knew the town well and had ambushed him several time by popping out in front of them. Marion had scrambled down a different alley each time, but he had the distinct sense that he was being funnelled and there was little he could do about it.

Marion's fears were confirmed when he scrambled out of an alley and found himself staring a vertical log walls on three sides, trapped against the wall outside the bailey of the castle.

"I see you're in danger Dreamer. Perhaps I can help." Marion turned to see the woman from earlier leaning over the wall to look down at him.

Marion shook his head, "Who are you? How do you know me? I mean besides this being my hallucination brought on by a brain tumour? Should I be doing this, having a discussion with my hallucination about the brain tumour causing that hallucination?"

"I am Morrigan. This is not a hallucination, this is a vision of the Shadowlands. This is story. That is how I know you, you are one of the Storytellers, and I need your help."

Marion heard the sounds of armoured bodies moving towards the corner where he stood, "What kind of help?"

"Aid my children. They need the help of the Storytellers. Dreamer and Walker are the ones that the story says will guide them to their destiny, and without the help of the storytellers, they will never be free. This is the price of my help. Decide quickly."

"I don't have much other option, unless I want to find out what it's like to die in a hallucination. I don't much like that option. In those dreams where you're falling, you always want to wake up before you hit bottom. So alright. If I ever meet your children, I will help them."

"You swear on your role in the story?" She asked.

"I hear him." One of the soldiers whispered, "He's talking to somebody."

"Yes, fine. I swear."

She clasped her hands and drew a symbol in the air and then leaned down to tap Marion's forehead. Marion's vision went black for a moment and then he blinked and found himself standing where he had begun. He looked down, he clothes were unmarked by the mud.

"Yup," He said quietly, "Hallucination."

He grinned, and felt a slightly crackling on his lip and chin. He reached up and wiped cracked and drying blood from his lips.

"okay, there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for that." He whispered.

Verse Seven: The Story

Marion stood frozen, his finger touching the cracked and drying blood on his lip. His mind tried to catch up with itself as it ran in circles inside his head screaming absurd theories and panicking.

"Okay, Option number one is that I bit my lip during the hallucination. And I guess it matches the scene from the dream world so well because my sick tumour ridden brain incorporated me biting my lip into the hallucination, because you know, it's considerate like that. Option number two is that I just dived head first

into a less PG-13 version of the tales of Narnia, only without the wardrobe and the Lion Messiah analogue," Marion paused in mid monologue and noticed people were staring at him, he debated trying to hide, but discarded the idea and kept talking. He needed to clear his head more than he needed to look normal to strangers at this point.

"Of course option three would be that both things are true. I have a nasty brain tumour that is psychically teleporting me into a Narnia world where I can be a hero as my brain dies. Given the life I'm living, I could deal with that. The question then would be whether I stay in the Narnia land, with it's cannibal monsters and paranoid villagers after I die or the window is only temporarily open due to my occasionally amusing brain sickness?"

He paused again.

"There are probably other options, but I can't think of them right now. I can ask Harley later, he'll think of all the boring reasonable options. Harley!"

Marion tipped his head down to look at his cell phone, now sitting on the concrete walkway beneath his feet. He bent down and picked it up cautiously. The phone thankfully appeared to merely be scratched and not broken entirely- Marion could not afford to replace it if it broke. Harley's call had dropped. Marion noted that the phone was displaying seven new text messages. Marion opened his text messages, they were all from Harley.

<<Marion are you still there? I can't hear you but there's still sound on the phone.>>

<<Marion are you ok?>>

<<What's happening? Talk to me>>

<<You've got me worried. text back.>>

<<Marion>>

<<MARION!>>

<<Marion can you hear me? Do you need help? Marion when is your break over?>>

Marion's shoulders sagged as he read the last text. He looked at the time listed on the phone, he'd been in dreamland for at least twenty five minutes. His break was fifteen minutes. He was late. Again.

Marion quickly tapped out a text to Harley.

<<I'm ok. Late. Again. Hallucinated again. I'll tell you later. So screwed. I'm never lucky.>>

Marion considered his options. He could sneak back and hope that he hadn't been missed. Or he could just tell Mr. Wheately that he had just made a pact to save the children of a lady from a magical village inside one of Marion's hallucinations. Sneak and and hope that nobody had noticed seemed like the better option. If he was lucky, but that seemed like a bad thing to think about just at that moment. Marion darted back into the building and walked as casually as he could to his section while also staying out of clear view of other employees. Marion kept alert for any glimpse of the tall razor shaped profile of Mr. Wheately.

Marion finally reached the literature section, and with Mr. Wheately nowhere nearby and no anywhere in sight, Marion allowed himself a brief thought that maybe his luck wasn't getting any worse. Marion truly loved bookstores, even big box commercialized cookie cutter bookstores like Allons-Y Books. Bookstores were quiet; almost like a library, although a bookstore was never that quiet. Marion took a moment to breathe in the silence, the quiet spaces in the air that gave Marion room to think. And then into that silence clamoured the sounds of a male and female voice rising in argument.

"This is not the time or the place, and neither is it your place to discuss your female objections to my business activities. Know your role in the grand scheme and keep to it Mary." The man's voice was loud, but he wasn't yelling. Marion knew that voice from University, he had heard it in the throat's of many tenured professors who didn't have a counter argument, but didn't agree with the student's assessment. Whoever Mary was, she was on the receiving end of an authority lecture. Marion also knew that if the fight got out of hand Mr. Wheately would somehow find a way to blame Marion for it. That seemed to be how the game was being played today at any rate. Marion strode through the shelves, honing in on the argument, hoping to placate the fighting couple before Mr. Wheately decided that this argument somehow showed something unemployable about Marion.

"Do you want to know what is my place Darius? My place is, as you so love to tell me, raising our children right. How am I going to raise them right when they watch you destroy lives for a few more dollars? How am I going to tell that it's important to be a moral and ethical person when their father is willing to gouge out an open pit mine in the middle a protected park on indigenous land by using the loophole of setting up

a fake tribal council to approve your project? How do I tell them that morality is important when there father does that?"

"It's not a fake council, the local governments: both federal and municipal have recognized that tribal council as valid. And do you think that the world keeps turning without raw material? Do you think our comfortable existence with my lovely car and that amazing house you get to raise our children in are possible without the materials needed to build them? They come from somewhere Mary, you just don't like to look at the process."

Marion rounded the corner and saw the people who were arguing. The man was imposing and dressed in a white on white suit with a crimson tie. He hair was a rich auburn streaked with grey. Two children, a girl with black hair who looked about nine years old and a boy with auburn hair who looked about thirteen years old stood behind the woman. Marion recognized the woman instantly as the woman from his hallucination.

"Morrigan?" He asked in surprise.

The family turned and they all looked at him in confusion, the man named Darius scowled, and the woman looked at Marion with an expression that told him instantly that she didn't know him. But he still knew her. Her hair was black with the same single strip of white. She was dressed in modern clothing, but all black with bird shaped patterns along the edges. This woman was Morrigan, Marion was sure of it. What he was to do know though, Marion had no idea.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. Can I help you folks find anything?"

"Yes," the woman said, " You can help my husband find your business ethics section. Meanwhile, I am looking for the works of Chinua Achebe. Do you know where his books are located?"

"My grasp of business and of ethics are perfect. Perhaps if you ran a business and had some income of your own, you would understand the realities of business and ethics on the ground." Darius said.

"I stayed home to raise the kids on your insistence you hypocrite. And I gave up a promising career to do so."

As the two began to argue again the girl pull on her mother's dress, "Mom. The Dreamer is here. He's here to help."

Marion looked at the little girl in shock.

"You have come to help, right?"

Darius stopped talking and looked back at Marion. "Of course he is. That's why we came in here. You should help them find the books Maia wants and then we can leave. It was Maia's idea to come here. So once we have her books, we can be on our way. We can continue this discussion in private, where family matters should remain."

Marion's mind raced, but he calmed himself back into bookseller mode, "You're in the right area for Chinua Achebe, it's sorted by last name in the Literature section. But I don't know that we'll have much of his work besides 'Things Fall Apart', the store tends to only stock things that have pop culture visibility," He turned to the little girl named Maia, "And what book did you want help finding?"

The little girl looked up at him, "Do you have any copies of 'Twelve Years a Slave'? Or what about Nelson Mandela's autobiography?"

"How old are you?" Marion asked.

"Nine. Why?"

"Those are heavy books. That's a great reading level for your age if you're reading those books. Heavy subjects too, they're both about people who were unjustly imprisoned."

"Did you put her up to asking for those books?" Darius said, his voice rising to dangerous levels. He took a step closer to Mary and loomed over her in a way that made Marion suspect he might strike her. Marion quickly squeezed between them and ran up.

"Kids are perceptive," Marion said quickly, "The whole store can tell you two are having difficulties, and your daughter is going to hear this at home too. If she's trying to send a message, maybe you should listen."

"How dare you! Do you know who I am? I am Darius Salt, and I could buy and sell you."

A little voice in Marion's head told him that this was not the situation he needed to be in right now. That little voice told him to back off, and to apologize and let the fight continue. Out of the corner of his vision, Marion could see Mr. Wheately leaning back against a bookshelf watching. Marion knew that how this ended would say a lot about his future at the company.

"Please help us." Maia said quietly. Marion wasn't sure if anyone else heard her. But Marion heard her.

"Then, Mr. Salt. Perhaps that says a lot more about why your daughter chose those books than anything her mother could have told her to say. Because, I you treat your business interests anything like you treat your family, your grasp of ethics would make Ebenezer Scrooge shake his head at the disgrace of it."

Mr. Wheately seemed to materialize beside Marion as he finished speaking, "My name is Wheately, sir. I'm store manager. Can I be of some assistance?"

Darius Salt stood with his mouth open and stared at Marion for a moment. He tried to speak and made no sound. He opened his mouth a second time, but no words emerged. Maia giggled and finally Darius Salt found his voice again.

"Yes you can be of some assistance. Fire this employee."

"It would be my pleasure sir."

Marion smiled and shook his head, "At least I earned it."

"Did you hear me, Marion? You're fired. You can return your name tag and leave."

"I think I'll dispute that." Marion said, "I need this job. And let's be honest, you need me. How late was I in last night getting this store ready for Mother's day? And on top of that, look at my sales numbers. You know that nobody in this store comes close to putting up the kind of sales numbers that I do. You'd have to hire three employees to replace my sales numbers, and that would triple the amount you have to pay to get the same amount of sales. I am far too useful to fire."

Mr. Wheately shook his head, "None of that matters if you can't properly prioritize your time. You wasted how many hours in the back this morning with some boutique seller? You could have been further maximizing sales potential on the floor. You are a continual missed opportunity for growth, and your mind isn't in the game. You don't promote the current promotions or follow sales protocol. You're a bad

example to other more dedicated high achievers. And now, on top of that you're insulting customers and they're complaining about you."

Darius Salt placed his right hand on his hip and watched with a small grin.

"If you fired every employee that a customer become upset with," Marion countered, "You would have to fire everyone including yourself. Customers get angry all the time, especially in big box stores like this. You've seen this place at Christmas, the spirit of intolerance reigns supreme."

"Even you should know that each case is different. I look at each case where a customer becomes upset and judge it on its own basis. And then I compare it with their performance and their employee record."

"My performance history is great. You know my customer satisfaction score is second highest in the store. My sales numbers are untouchable." Marion said, "You just don't like me."

Maia pulled on her mother's dress again, "Make it stop Mom."

Mary hushed Maia, and Mr. Wheately continued on oblivious, "What I don't like is your continued tardiness. You didn't sneak in here unnoticed this morning. You didn't get away with your unacceptably long break. Your tardiness is ongoing and entirely unprofessional. How can I employ somebody who doesn't work the hours that they are scheduled to work."

"You could start by giving them the legally required amount of hours between shifts. That would be good. You could follow it up by not scheduling people on closing shifts and then opening shifts back to back. There are labour laws regarding this sort of stuff. Oh and you could give the the legally required amount of notice prior to changing our shifts. That would be a good way to make sure people can show up on time and work the shift they're scheduled to work. Or do labour laws get in the way of high achievement?"

Mr. Wheately's face clenched, and lines appeared to radiate out from his tightened jaw line. He looked around, and quickly spotted the enormous man who acted as the store's secret shopper. Mr. Wheately waved the man, named Burt, over to the group.

"Burt, Marion has elected to end his employment with Allons-Y Books, and needs to be escorted out of the store for security reasons. Can you assist him in this?"

Burt looked in surprise as Marion, "But the guy's cool. He doesn't ever do bad on the floor. Guy in the red tie here was about to hit the lady, and Marion stepped in the way. Marion's cool, I don't get the problem."

"Thanks Burt." Marion said.

"Your position here is not a decision making position Burt, it's an enforcement position. Now escort Marion out of the building or I will call the police and have two former employees escorted out."

"Yeah okay, if you think this is worth going Nuclear over then I guess so. Come on Marion. I know this isn't cool, but I don't have any choice in this."

"No problem Burt, we all need jobs." Marion said.

They began to walk away. Marion could see Maia desperately tugging on her mother's dress and her mother hushing her repeatedly.

"Oh, and Marion?" Mr. Wheately called, "If you even think about demanding your final pay check, then I will press harassment charges against you based on your conduct today. Cheers!"

"I could make a call to the Business Bureau. They'd be really interested to hear about your management style. That wouldn't make you look very good. A high achiever like you wouldn't want a business bureau complaint. Be hard to explain that when you apply for regional manager."

"I'd manage. The bureau gets more than enough crank calls from disgruntled ex-employees. And you'd find that word got around that you were the sort of person whose resume was best kept in a circular file."

"You aren't that influential."

"Try me."

"At least I never have to hear your buzzword spewing lies anymore. Just remember, everyone here thinks you're a lying petty dictator and nobody believes the rubbish you spew about achieving. We're customer service reps working for minimum wage. We don't care. We put up with you because we don't have a choice."

"You can think what you like."

None of what was happening seemed real. The hallucinations seemed more real than what was currently happening. Marion paused thinking his options over, they seemed bad and worse. Darius stood grinning and Maia continued to pull on her mother's dress. The boy stood there quietly watching. Before Marion could decide on a course of action, Burt put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on guy."

"Fine. You win."

"That's what high achievers do."

Burt walked Marion to the front door.

"He can't not pay me. Can he?" Marion asked.

"I don't know. It's not cool, but I bet he's going to make me call the cops if you try to come back. That's what he normally does when he fires somebody. But hey, maybe this is a good thing. You were too smart for this job. Maybe this is a sign that you need to find your calling. Maybe this is the start of something better."

Marion sighed, "Thanks Burt. It's been good working with you."

"You too. You were a fun guy."

"Not to everyone apparently." Marion began to make his way to the bus stop. He didn't bother running and didn't look up. About half way there, he realized he could remove his tie. He pulled the tie and slid it loose from around his neck. He held up the tie and looked at it in disgust. Marion hated neckties. As he passed a waste bin he shoved the tie in the basket without stopping. He reached the bus as was startled out of his self-loathing briefly as the bus rounded the corner and stopped neatly in front of him.

"Now I get lucky." He muttered bitterly as he sat in a prime seat near the doors mid way back on the bus.

Marion knew something was wrong as soon as he stepped into the alley. His window now had police tape across the width of its shattered surface. He turned and glared at the MIB poster.

"So what? I'm only lucky on little things that don't matter? On big things probability gets free kicks, is that it?"

The poster said nothing. Marion headed up to his apartment the more traditional way, fearing what he knew must be at the top. His door was closed, police tape stretched across it. Three men in police uniforms and Mr. Grimly stood before the door. One of the officers noticed him and pointed, Mr. Grimly nodded in response.

Mr. Grimly was built like a giant toad had bought Jabba the Hut's weight loss video. He always dressed in a grey pinstriped suit and jacket, plus a white collared shirt with the collar opened one button too wide, exposing garish silver chains with heavily embellished crucifixes. The clothing was all reasonable quality, but looked cheap because Mr. Grimly sweated constantly, even in the dead of winter, leaving all his clothes horribly stained by mid morning. He tended to stand with his hand pressed together just beneath his chin like some cheap children's movie villain from some fairy tale about an evil Uncle or Court Wizard.

Marion walked towards the four men as though in a daze. The officers explained that he had been robbed, with entry likely gained by breaking a window. Marion did not correct them. They indicated that the likely reason for the break in was that the window had not been properly secured, and pointed to the remains of Marion's window system now sitting in a plastic bag. Virtually everything portable and reasonably valuable had been taken: his laptop, his portable television and blu-ray player, etc... All that was left behind was a single poster: The Matrix Revolutions, and his sleeping bag which was found in the hallway.

Police took Marion's statement. Marion kept thing pretty vague, indicating that he had left for work early due to an opening shift, and not correcting them about him breaking the window. He hoped Mrs. Trilby had not told them about his escapades. Once they had taken his statement, the Police officers indicated that he was free to enter the apartment and to call them if he thought of anything. One officer advised that it was unlikely they would recover anything.

Once the officers had left, Grimly began to chuckle, "So you know, I'm going to bill you for the window you little pill bug. That was your stupid little wannabe handyman bunk that let those guys in. I heard them in there and thought it was you. You're such a weasel I thought you were trying to avoid me. So since the break in is your fault, you get to pay for the window. And furthermore, I'm going to be keeping the damage deposit."

"What do you mean, keeping the damage deposit?" Marion asked.

"What I got to spell it out? I am evicting your little amoeba brained butt. Take your sleeping bag and your poster and don't come back. I already changed the locks and boarded up the window. You're done. Three strikes and you're out."

Marion shook his head.

"What's that? You don't like it? You wanna maybe dispute this? Take it to the tenant's rights board or some such nonsense."

"Why bother? You win." Marion said and turned away.

"I'm gonna get the money I'm owed from you. I got your references, and I'm going to squeeze until I get blood."

Marion shook his head and didn't turn around," Good luck with that."